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ABSTRACT

For thousands of years the craft of reading and writing was the closely guarded monopoly of small elites. Only relatively recently has literacy become available to most people in developed nations. Historical surveys of literacy have used a wide range of definitions of the skills involved, one of the more important of which views reading as a system of decoding written symbols into spoken language. As for the levels of literacy, the media makes new claims all too frequently suggesting that reading and writing abilities are dropping. Consider, however, society's increasing demands on the reading ability of its public. Further, the accelerating advance of technology that has occurred in the latter part of the 20th century can be seen to be partly the result of advanced levels of education and literacy. The organization of society can thus be seen as completely literacy-dependent, and it is up to the schools to "bestow" literacy upon the populace. Unfortunately, for many the process of being educated is not a happy one, and many children do emerge at 16 inadequately literate, and ill-prepared for life. There are some children who arrive at school with more factors that will facilitate the relatively easy transition to literacy than others. There are no doubt some failings in the system. One such failing is that the educational system of England makes little allowance for the varied pace of development of children. (Contains 17 references.) (TB)

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CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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LITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH SOCIETY

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LITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH SOCIETY

The Historical Perspective

In the history of mankind, literacy is a very new skill. According to Eric Havelock (1976: 12, quoted by Graff, 1987:26):

> The biological historical fact is that homo sapiens is a species which uses oral speech..... to communicate. This is his definition. He is not, by definition, a writer or reader. His use of speech... has been acquired by a process of natural selection operating over a million years. The habit of using written symbols to represent such speech is just a useful trick which has existed over too short a time to have been built into our genes, whether or not this may happen in half a million years hence. ...In short, reading man, as opposed to speaking man, is not biologically determined. He wears the appearance of a recent historical accident.

Accident or not, our western society is so saturated with print and the activities that surround it, that it is taken for granted as a feature of our everyday lives. It is thus a straightening exercise to consider the chronology:

Homo sapiens	1 million years old
Writing (c3000 BC)	5,000 years old
Western literacy (600 BC)	2,600 years old
Printing (1,400 AD)	430 years old
Western mass literacy (c1800 AD)	?200 years old.

For thousands of years the craft of reading and writing was the closely guarded monopoly of small elites. Up to the period of the Renaissance, levels of literacy in Europe were very restricted. From then onwards, the progress of literacy has close links with the growth of commercial activity and the process of urbanisation. By about 1700 England and the Netherlands were probably the two most literate countries in Europe, and by about 1800, in Europe as a whole, literate persons were in a majority, and a fundamental change had taken place "from restricted to mass literacy" (Houston, 1988:1).

Although formal education was not the only force operational in the spread of literacy, it was nonetheless a very important factor, and particularly so in England compared with some other European countries. In fact, whereas the move towards industrialisation was a phenomenon which in countries such as France and Germany promoted the spread of literacy, in England it was the opposite scenario: the progress of education slowed down as children could not attend elementary schools because they were working in the factories. By the mid-nineteenth century the population was scarcely more literate than it had been a century earlier. However, after the 1840s education moved ahead rapidly, and with it, levels of literacy.

Government moves and the education acts of 1869, 1870, 1876, 1891, 1902 and 1918, in which last act the school leaving age was raised to fourteen years, all gradually paved the way towards a universal, free elementary education in this country.

"There can be no doubt that this (1870 Education Act) and subsequent legislation which, in principle, secured compulsory, free elementary education for all, pushed literacy (as measured by signatures in the marriage registers) to its official 'ceiling' levels of around ninety seven per cent for both men and women by the end of the century". (Levine, 1986:93).

Definitions of Literacy

> The major problem, which lags far behind efforts to study literacy whether in the past or the present, is that of reconstructing the contexts of reading and writing: how, when, where, why and to whom literacy was transmitted; the meanings that were assigned to it; the uses to which it was put; the demands placed on literate abilities; the degrees to which those demands were met; the changing extent of social restrictedness in the distribution and diffusion of literacy; and the real and symbolic differences that emanated from the social condition of literacy among the people. (Graff, 1987:23).

Historical surveys of literacy have used a wide range of definitions of the skills involved, largely derived from the restricted sources available to them, such as wills, inventories, marriage register, tests for military recruits, etc. The ability to sign one's name (Houston, 1988:5) does not necessarily mean, however, the same person has any reading skill at all, and the definition "able to read and write" (Oxenham, 1980:2) really avoids the problem by not addressing it at all. We need to consider what degree of skill in reading and writing make a person "literate" in the modern civilised world.

Differing definitions of literacy in the more recent history of the debate really fall between two main poles. One of these defines reading as a system of decoding written symbols into spoken language, which may be internalised, and which does not necessarily mean that interpretation or understanding takes place, and the other sees reading as a process of deducing meaning from written language. Writing, although a separate skill, is often regarded as being concomitant with reading and an extension of it. Far less separate research has been devoted to writing, mainly because, "the perennial debate about the 'correct' way to teach beginning reading in schools occupies the centre of the stage," (Levine, 1986:23).

At an international level this century UNESCO has been an important body in the drive towards universal literacy worldwide, focusing on the underdeveloped countries of the Third World. Through UNESCO a new term evolved which has become important in any discussion of literacy in the modern age. The term, first coined by the US Board of Census in 1947, is "functional literacy". At first the definition of functional literacy put forward by UNESCO was that a person "should be sufficiently fluent not only to make out words on a page or copy them out but also to read a newspaper and write a letter", (Houston, 1988:4). By 1956 it was: "A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in

reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group", (Gray, 1956, quoted by Oxenham, 1980:86). This is a definition of literacy which is a very useful point of reference in modern English society, besides holding good for other cultures and communities across the world. A later 1962 UNESCO definition added a further important feature, that of personal development and the common good for the community:

> A person is literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development. (Oxenham, 1980:87).

Much later Harvey Graff (1987:4) says literacy "is above all a technology or set of techniques for communications and for decoding and reproducing written or printed material". This fails to set the "technology" in any sociological context, however. The "effective functioning" and personal development referred to in the 1962 UNESCO definition moves us closest to what we require of literacy today. A definition of literacy that would have served effectively in the Middle Ages, such as being able to sign one's name, would be quite irrelevant in the modern age, now that our whole way of life pivots so crucially around the printed word. We have come to regard literacy not as an adjunct to life, not only as a basic necessity, but as a fundamental human right. This is a change which we have witnessed this century. At the beginning of the twentieth century to be literate still meant being able to read or write, but in our advanced technological society demands have altered so greatly that we consider a minimum of ten years' education is required to deliver the most basic elements of required literacy. In our democratic society it is regarded as essential that everyone be enabled towards literacy of the highest possible degree, even if afterwards all but the most basic skills become little used. We have a great concern for the rights of individuals which they may not be able to enjoy if they are not literate. Literacy is seen as an enabling factor in our society. Conversely, illiteracy is considered to be so disabling that those who emerge from our educational system "functionally illiterate" seek to hide the fact, as it carries social stigma and almost the status of an illness. Illiterates are pitied for what is seen to be a failing on their part. Illiterates can get to know things by themselves through observation, hearsay, television and radio, telephone communications and films, and oral interaction, but they are denied the possibility of learning through print, and even vehicles of oral communication such as television and telephone carry with them a wide range of printed accessories in the form of programme schedules, directories and instruction formats.

The Scale of Illiteracy

The mass media seem to make fresh claims of falling reading standards or basic skill deficiencies among children and school leavers every week with monotonous regularity. The question of definitions rears its head again with any discussion of levels of literacy in current society, which makes it particularly difficult to untangle the conflicting statements presented by the media, the politicians and the educational sector. In practical

terms, we have no concrete measure of numbers of adults who are "illiterate", "sub-literate" or "functionally illiterate".

The evidence we do have is of two basic types: conventional educational research in the form of normative assessment, such as standardised reading tests of the type administered by the National Foundation for Educational Research, and secondly, national surveys such as the National Child Development Study administered by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, using subjective information based on self-assessment (ALBSU, 1983, quoted by Levine 1986,:165). There are drawbacks involved in the interpretation of both types of evidence, which necessitate caution in the identification of national trends. The reading test evidence suggests that illiteracy was gradually eliminated during the two decades after the Second World War in this country, and semi-illiteracy likewise gradually reduced until the 1960s (Start and Wells, 1972: 52, quoted by Levine, 1986:165). However, the criterion for these conclusions were a 1938 reading age of seven for illiteracy and a reading age between seven and nine for semi-illiteracy. No account was taken of the changing requirements of society, and the tests measured only one restricted aspect of reading, and not writing at all. The national self-assessment surveys, on the other hand, revealed ten per cent of adults considering themselves to have a literacy problem, with either reading, writing or spelling, but different people have different standards, and a problem to one person may be no problem at all to another. It is impossible to make accurate deductions from such subjective, information, and the nature of the samples taken from the population can further cloud the issue.

With samples and statistics giving us only a shadowy part of the whole picture, it becomes even more important to consider the literacy debate in the light of the historical process and the social and economic conditioning factors of the age. Even in the period since the war, society's demands on the skills of reading and writing in its members have increased hugely, both in the place of work and in the home, as anyone who is not an electrical engineer but has recently tried to digest the instructions of a complex microwave oven will testify!

It seems that in practice illiteracy can be identified largely in socio-economic pockets, and the links between illiteracy and poverty are almost too obvious to reiterate. There is a cycle that can begin with semi-literate parents in jobs where few demands are made on literacy skills, or unemployment, in homes devoid of reading matter except the tabloid press, comic style magazines and the bills that come through the post. Children from such homes in inner city areas see little hope of employment when they leave school, and so little motivation to acquire skills which can bring to them no practical reward, and which they might have to struggle to acquire, bringing with them no built-in literacy conditioning or interest at home. This is, of course, a stereotype, but nevertheless there are truths to be found here. The illiteracy that can be encountered here is not the result of incompetence but of a lack of motivation resulting in street-wise scorn and avoidance of activities for learning literacy skills.

Outside the socio-economic pockets of illiteracy, there are also cultural pockets, which would include certain ethnic minorities, for whom literacy in a second language is extra difficult when they can function perfectly well without it within the security of their ethnic peer groups. This type of illiteracy is often gradually reduced across the generations, as the

children of each successive generation reach out into the broader society and communicate more and more in English. Travellers are an ethnic minority with a high incidence of illiteracy for a different reason : theirs is a culture where oracy is still stronger than literacy, in a way which the rest of society has moved on from.

Dyslexics are a group of people who have a technical handicap to overcome in the process of acquiring literacy. The term "dyslexia" has appeared as a result of mass education and literacy this century, through which it has emerged that literacy does not come automatically to all people given a certain degree of intelligence, tuition, exposure, motivation and practice. This comes as no surprise when we consider the historical context of mass-literacy and its extreme recency. Our genes do not yet carry programming for reading, and evolution has designed mankind to have diverse strengths. It would be extraordinary if we were to all achieve reading and writing with the same ease that we achieve speech.

Technology and Literacy

The rapidly accelerating advance of technology that we have witnessed worldwide during the twentieth century can be seen to be partly the result of advanced levels of education and literacy and partly the cause. The publishing industry illustrates the two-way nature of the relationship. The amount of printed material of all types has greatly increased, partly as a result of the increasing level of bureaucracy, partly as a result of the numbers of people pursuing further education, partly in response to the demands for "leisure" reading of many different types. New processes have evolved in the printing industry, which could be said to result from increased intellectual activity leading to great technical advances. Such new processes , which are the offspring of a very advanced and increasingly specialised literacy, also in turn make increased demands on the literacy of the work force, in learning about and operating and maintaining the new technology. The size and worldwide organisation of the business network in turn gives rise to rapid changes in information and communication technology; the process is cyclical. Further, as technology advances within the industry, it becomes much less labour-intensive, adding to the numbers of people who have less work, and, as a result, more leisure time at their disposal. The repercussions of this, with reference to the use of literacy in Society, are again not purely linear. More leisure could mean more time to read for its own sake, and to pursue those hobbies which may involve reading from journals, specialist magazines or instruction manuals. This might mean increased demand for the products of the publishing industry. However, there are so many non-literary leisure pursuits available, not least television, video, radio, etc. that the converse may equally be true. Thus advanced literacy supports and advances technology, which in turn may support, or may detract from advanced literacy.

The computer industry serves as another example of the interesting ways in which literacy serves and is served by technology. Indeed, the term "computer-literacy" immediately adds a new dimension to the function of literacy in our society. Whatever the quality or quantity of computer experience of an individual, its effect can pull two ways. On the one hand it can consolidate failure in education in general and literacy in particular through its intellectual demands; on the other hand it can play a vital role in the remedial education of those experiencing difficulties

with literacy, through simple visually attractive programmes, through word-processing functions such as spell checks, and through the multi-sensory nature of the operation. Further, "By removing some of the social and economic barriers surrounding it, the new technologies have made the printed word much less exclusive, placing many people in authorial and editorial roles whose education and background barely prepared them to be consumers let alone producers of print," (Levine, 1986:205). This has a further effect in that it deposes the book as a cultural form, undermining to some extent its "pre-eminence.... as a repository of distilled knowledge and an exemplar of 'complete' literacy", (ibid). However, the rate of development and change in computers of all types across their range of uses is again actually brought about by a very effective specialist and advanced literacy, which in turn makes demands of general literacy as society embraces the changes.

It can be seen then that there is a duality of role for literacy in the modern society: as a causal factor in economic and social changes and developments, and as a dependent variable responding to context.

> Literacy, increasingly, is connected to the larger network of communicative competencies (the oral and electronic, for example) not contrasted dichotomously and developmentally from them; it is also conceptualised more as a continuous, widely varying, and non-linear attribute. Its importance as a shaper of attitudes and as a symbol and symbolic influence stands beside, in partial independence from, its role in cognitive and skill determination. To speak of literacy in the abstract is now considered hazardous, if not quite meaningless. (Graff, 1987:4)

The Importance of Literacy in Modern Society

It could now be argued, in the light of the race of technology, that the electronic communications media are increasingly rendering superfluous the skills of reading and writing (numeracy may also be included in the same trend). Radio, telephone, television, video and films could all in a sense be considered substitutes for literacy. Nevertheless we are, as a society, constantly reviewing the way that the educational sector is serving society at large in terms of the extent and quality of literacy that is the end product. So what is the importance to the individual of high quality literacy, and to society at large of mass literacy? For those engaged in any study of literacy, it is likely that for them literacy has opened up the world. This will not be the case for other very large numbers of people, but there are undoubtedly wide benefits in terms of personal development which may underlie the obvious practical uses.

Literacy "seems to have enabled the growth and development of the human reason and its power to combine different sources of information to produce even more understanding and inspiration. It has been potent, too, in the growth of self-consciousness and self-understanding," (Oxenham, 1980:43).

This is not to say that everyone who becomes literate, at however high a level, will use literacy in any philosophic or creative way. However, "we have no way of telling beforehand those who will use literacy to push the frontiers of thought and technology further," (ibid). It is possible to make predictions about the sort of people who are most likely to use their

literacy intensively, and those who will use it less so or not at all, but it is not possible to be certain. Even if it were, no self-respecting democracy could consider any ideal other than equal opportunity as far as the teaching of literacy skills is concerned. It has certainly become a human right in the developed world in the twentieth century, however recently we have arrived at that situation.

Secondly, it may also be the case that the process of acquiring literacy skills may actually be as important as the subsequent use those skills are put to. The mastery of reading and writing involves the exercise and fine tuning of the mental faculties such as visual and oral discrimination, the engagement of the memory, intelligent application, concentration and the process of dynamic mental coordination. It could be that other learning processes may reap the same ultimate rewards, but, historically speaking, literacy has come to be regarded as the key progenitor to learning and achievement.

> It would seem that the more literate people are, the more willing they are to accept and work for improvements in their societies... This may mean they respond more readily to leadership for change, rather than that literacy itself induces appetites for change and improvement, (Oxenham, 1980:51).

Literacy is a function of humanity that was evolved and developed as a practical response to a need, but its application can be much wider than to the purely practical, and it can have important side effects. These include the general ability of an individual to learn in a systematic way, to reason and evaluate. It can improve the coordination and operation of the mental and physical faculties. It is necessary and fundamental to the bureaucratic and commercial organisation of the modern society. It is also vital to the development of intellectual activity, science and technology. "Literacy really is the technology of the intellect," (ibid:84).

Literacy and its current relationship with Education

The organisation of society can thus be seen as completely literacy-dependent. "The combined pressures of commerce, technology, government, politics, religion and culture have created needs, rewards and demands for literacy, (Oxenham, 1980:13). In order to participate fully and with confidence in society it is necessary to become literate, even if this gift is not used in any elevated sense. Literacy is the rockbed of survival in modern society.

The role of "bestowing" literacy upon the populace belongs to our schools. This is the *raison d'etre* of our educational system, although quite rightly the aims and objectives of the educational process are very broad and seek the well-rounded development of the whole person.

Unfortunately, for many the process of being educated is not a happy one, and many children do emerge at sixteen inadequately literate, and ill-prepared for life in terms of the basic skills demanded by society at large. Whatever the scale of difficulty encountered at school by such children, this will inevitably have been accompanied by feelings of defeat, inadequacy and inferiority. For some this will have resulted in loss of motivation, for others bitterness and behavioural maladjustment.

"The first thing to recognise in this extremely uncomfortable situation, is the extreme difficulty - and in the context of human evolution the extreme novelty - of the educational enterprise which modern western cultures have taken upon themselves. We need not be too defensive about not yet having managed it well.....If we are going to persist in our educational enterprise it is urgent that we learn to do it better. Whatever progress we have made, the present levels of human distress and wasted effort are still too high to bear," (Donaldson, 1978:15).

There are, obviously, some children who arrive at school with more factors that will facilitate the relatively easy transition to literacy than others. There is no doubt that a home where reading and writing are seen to matter, are a source of recreation and information and where books feature largely, is a helpful starting point. If a child has enjoyed stories read and told, and participated in familiar tales from an early age, then this will also be a positive influence. If games and puzzles, sorting and other discriminatory tasks, sequencing activities and role play have also been a feature of a child's pre-school years, then this will be a further advantage. There are, nevertheless, no guarantees that all these facilitating factors will make the acquisition of literacy easy, but the majority of children do succeed, at various rates, and to a wide range of "ceiling" levels. We have earlier referred to a minority, who in some estimates may be as many as 10%, who will be affected by the handicap of dyslexia.

Children arriving at school with none of the above advantages will in the majority of cases still achieve literacy, but it will be a more difficult process, and they may need to pass through many of the pre-reading stages first. Motivation is another important aspect in the successful pursuance of literacy, and we have stated earlier that in some social stratas this may be very low indeed, especially beyond the infant years. Other possible handicaps to literacy, such as verbal deprivation, have been now largely discredited : "the myth of verbal deprivation is particularly dangerous, because it diverts attention from real defects in our educational system to imaginary defects of the child," (Labov 1969: 179, quoted by Rosen, 1972:16: referring to Bernstein's "elaborated code".)

There are no doubt some failings in the system, or, to be more fair, areas where we have much to learn. One such failing is that our educational system makes little allowance for the varied pace of development of our children. Progress in literacy is related to levels of maturity, and requires the complex interaction of a range of faculties, all of which will vary in their rate of development. Children are sometimes labelled <u>slow</u>, <u>remedial</u>, <u>special needs</u> - the terminology changes - when the reality is that they have not "peaked" in their readiness for literacy skills at the most educationally convenient time. Adults are quicker to become proficient in literacy skills (when making a first acquaintance with them or when having a second attempt) than children, and yet provision for teaching literacy to adults lies outside the mainstream educational system of our country.

It is interesting to consider whether we should place less emphasis on becoming literate in the early years of schooling; after all, English children begin school attendance earlier than most European counterparts. It would be anarchic to suggest that literacy could theoretically be given the status of a craft, and taught to those who wanted it at the time they

felt most appropriate. However, in current society we treat literacy with the zeal and devotion of missionaries taking religions to the unenlightened: it is our duty to impart this gift to people, especially children, their lives will be richer for it, they have a right to it. It could possibly be argued that people have a human right not to become literate!

This brings us to the question of access. In theory the laws of compulsory school attendance give all children access to the literacy activities of classrooms. In practice there are some who slip though the net. Some children truant, some are excluded or do not attend because of school-phobia or pregnancy. Provision has to be made for those who cannot attend school, but there are practical difficulties and provision is sometimes very thin. Some children simply do not attend, perhaps because of cultural prejudice, as happens sometimes with traveller children, and these children may not be able to attend because of their itinerant lifestyles. Again there is educational provision outside school for these children, but is thinly spread and there are great problems with continuity. Some children are educated at home, and because of the numbers involved it is difficult to gauge the quality of their access to literacy activities in any certain way, although of course much of it may be excellent.

Given that most children do have access to the literacy activities of classrooms, then it is necessary to consider the quality of the experience with reference to its success to the individual and to the demands of society. Recently educational research has become concerned with the differing contexts of literacy activities within the complex subculture of individual classrooms, (Bloome, 1989:6).

According to George Steiner (1978: 201, quoted by Levine, 1986:169), "Since it cannot supply the foundations for classic literacy, mass education is 'organised amnesia', conducive to shallow and semi-attentive reading adequate to the caption, the hoarding and pulp-fiction, but inimical to....'full' reading". Steiner argued that only a minority of people are capable of aspiring to the pinnacle of the classical literacy tradition. It certainly seems to be the case that wider rates of literacy do not necessarily mean widely increased qualitative abilities.

So this is the current preoccupation of educational theorists and researchers, politicians and policy makers. Literacy "remains the almost unquestioned basis of almost any activity dignified by the label 'education'," (Oxenham, 1980:134). But for modern society, literacy alone is not enough, and we even look beyond the idea of a functional literacy to a more elevated ideal, an ability to "read the world - rather than the word" (Bataille, 1976: 167). Further, we must work diligently to remove the barriers that result in failure to attain the benefits of literacy from some people, and especially children in our schools. Literacy is a catalyst and a function of change and development. We must continue to pursue a high standard of literacy which serves us well as individuals, and as a society.

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